

Stories from the Honour Boards

Stories of those who served and are remembered on the Honour Boards in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church

Booklet Number 51

BURNS BROTHERS

James Burns

1890 - 1968

Alexander Burns

1893 - 1917



Alexander Burns

James Burns

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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
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Burns Family from Scotland

James and Alexander Burns were the fourth and fifth children and only sons of James Kerr and Helen Burns n e Johnman. Their parents were born in Scotland and emigrated to Queensland with their infant first child in 1884 for health reasons. Having been employed by the Caledonian Railways, James Kerr Burns was quickly engaged by the Queensland Railways. He was rapidly promoted from Clerk to Stationmaster, serving at Albion and Rosewood, ultimately becoming Chief Traffic Inspector based at Roma Street Railway Headquarters. He was also Chairman of the Railway Institute. James Kerr Burns was highly respected and well liked by his staff who referred affectionately to him as 'JK'.

James and Helen Burns had four daughters and two sons - Margaret, Jessie, Helen, James (Jamie), Alexander (Alec) and Annie (Queenie). From 1910, they lived at Indooroopilly in Lambert Road in a large Queenslander style home named Hazeldean. Education was valued so all the children were well educated and encouraged to develop their talents. Before her marriage, Helen Burns had attended the Royal School of Needlework in Edinburgh so she taught her skills to all her daughters. The family was very musical, forming their own quartet. The piano was in the drawing room which was referred to as 'the music room'. Those who knew the Burns family well described them as 'a brilliant family'. The Burns family made their contribution to the development of Queensland. The two sons enlisted in the Great War and their stories illustrate the impact of their wartime experiences on their own lives and those of their family at home in Brisbane, Queensland.

Corporal James Burns

James (known as Jamie) Burns was born on 21 December 1890 at Rosewood, Queensland where his father was Stationmaster. Jamie worked as a Customs Officer at the Customs House at Circular Quay in Brisbane. He was also in the Army Reserve before World War I.



On 19 November 1914, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as a Private with regimental service number 455 in the 2nd Light Horse Field Ambulance which embarked on HMAT *Borda* from Brisbane in December 1914, the first contingent from Queensland to go overseas. He disembarked at Alexandria, Egypt. Jamie became a corporal and joined the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force on Gallipoli Peninsula in May.¹

On 21 September, 1915, he was wounded by shrapnel in the left knee. He was taken from Gallipoli by Hospital Ship *Dunluce Castle* to Malta where he was admitted to the Tigne Military Hospital.

Cables were sent to his parents at Indooroopilly advising that he was 'reported dangerously ill wounded'. Septic poisoning had set in and he had 17 operations for gangrene. Though off the dangerously ill list by late October, he was transported by SS *Regina D'Italia* to England for admission to the General Hospital in Oxford on 12 November 1915.

¹ *Stories from the Honour Boards*, Booklet 24 shows a photograph on page 6 of Corporal Burns with Privates Algernon and Ernest Pilcher titled *ANZACS AND TURKISH PRESENTS*.

He was the first Australian serviceman treated in Oxford Hospital and while there, he met the Princess Royal. In June 1916 at No 1 Auxiliary Hospital at Harefield, England it was necessary to amputate his leg. An artificial limb was fitted. He was discharged from the AIF as permanently unfit for active service at home or abroad on 22 July 1916.

It was unusual for soldiers unfit for active service to be discharged in England. A certificate of discharge was issued on the grounds that James Burns stated he had relatives residing in Scotland, he was able to maintain himself in England and he had no dependents or engagements necessitating his return to Australia. At the same time, the Customs Branch of the High Commissioner's Office of the Commonwealth of Australia in London declared it was willing and anxious to make use of Corporal Burns's services as early as possible.

Following his discharge James Burns took up duty officially in the High Commissioner's Office a few days later. By taking his discharge in England, James forfeited a free passage to Australia. In ensuing months he continued correspondence with AIF administration headquarters concerning an unpaid ration allowance of 1/7d (16c) a day while he was on furlough and his distress as a result of his leg amputation.

He wrote, "The artificial limb supplied to me at Harefield Hospital has been very unsatisfactory and already has caused me some expense. Within a month of my discharge from Harefield Hospital the artificial limbs supplied to persons situated like myself were condemned and the patients are now in turn being supplied with proper limbs at Roehampton. I claim that I am entitled to similar treatment."

At the end of the year 1917, James Burns, while still employed at Australia House, The Strand, London, received a Certificate No 477 in recognition of his military service along with a Silver War Badge to “be worn on the right breast or on the right lapel of the jacket, but not in Naval or Military uniform”.

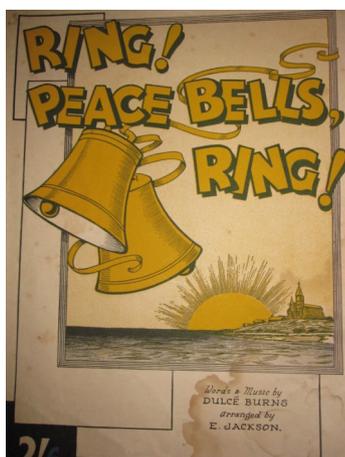


After the War, he received the British War Medal, the Victory Medal and the 1914/15 Star.



He also received a medallion *‘In commemoration of the heroic deeds of the men of ANZAC at GALLIPOLI in 1915’* given by the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia *‘in recognition of the great debt owed by all Australians.’*

After returning to Australia, James Burns completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the University of Queensland and continued his employment in the Commonwealth Public Service, becoming chief clerk of the Queensland branch of the Commonwealth Health Department.



In 1919, James married Irene Mona Eames and they lived at Ascot. They had one son, Malcolm Eames Burns (who was born deaf). His wife predeceased him. In 1937, Jamie married Dulcé Letitia Eames, an accomplished musician and composer. Her composition of both words and music of *Ring! Peace Bells, Ring!* was published during World War II.

After retirement from the Public Service, James Burns, B Com, ACIS, AASA was a Registered Public Accountant and Chartered Secretary in Julia Creek, Queensland where he handled the accounts of large station properties and contributed to the public life of the town. Shortly after his arrival, he was appointed Branch Secretary of the Julia Creek branch of the Central and Northern Graziers' Association. In Brisbane, James Burns's name is on an Honour Board at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church and the Department of Trade and Customs WW1 Honour Board at the Customs House.



He died at the Kenmore Repatriation Centre on 25 September 1968, aged 78 years. He willed his body to the University of Queensland for medical research.

Flight-Lieutenant Alexander Burns



Alexander (Alec) Burns was born in February 1893 in Rosewood. He was educated at Rosewood State School and also received private tuition. While apprenticed to the Engineering Section at the Railway Workshops in Ipswich, he was a member of the crew which built the first rail motor in Queensland. A photograph of this group is displayed at the Rosewood Railway Museum.

At an early age Alexander displayed great engineering talent. He took advantage of the concession provided by the Commissioner (Colonel C Evans) by attending classes at the Technical College. Subsequently he took up a position as Draughtsman in the Engineering Department in the Brisbane Technical College. The Works Foreman at Ipswich and the Engineering Staff of the Technical College considered him a man with a bright future. Alexander Burns was very popular with all with whom he came in contact and was of an exceptionally bright disposition.

With his older brother on active service with the AIF at Gallipoli and the reports of the Australians at Anzac Cove, Alexander enlisted in Brisbane to serve abroad in July 1915. Successfully securing his commission, Alexander sailed from Sydney on HMAT *Star of Victoria* as 2nd Lieutenant, 16th Rifles, 15th Battalion on 31 March 1916 for Tel el-Kabir,¹ Egypt, arriving on 5 May.

¹ Tel el-Kabir was a training site for the AIF in World War 1

After training exercises in Egypt, his unit embarked from Alexandria per British troopship *Huntspill* to join the British Expeditionary Force in France. As Adjutant, he was highly complimented by Brigadier-General Stirling who gave him a letter for the Brigadier-General of the Battalion to which he was attached. The letter stated that 2nd Lieutenant Alexander Burns was a very capable organiser, carrying out his routine orders with energy and tact and maintaining a good standard of discipline whilst acting in that role. He also stated that Lieutenant Burns would do well in any capacity.

Immediately on his arrival in France, Alexander took part with the newly formed 47th Battalion in the Somme Battles, being promoted to Lieutenant on 11 October 1916 in the field. He was in Belgium when he received news of his appointment to the Royal Flying Corps, England. He transferred to the Royal Flying Corps on 22 October 1916 and joined No 2 Royal Flying Corps School of Instruction in Oxford on 23 October 1916.

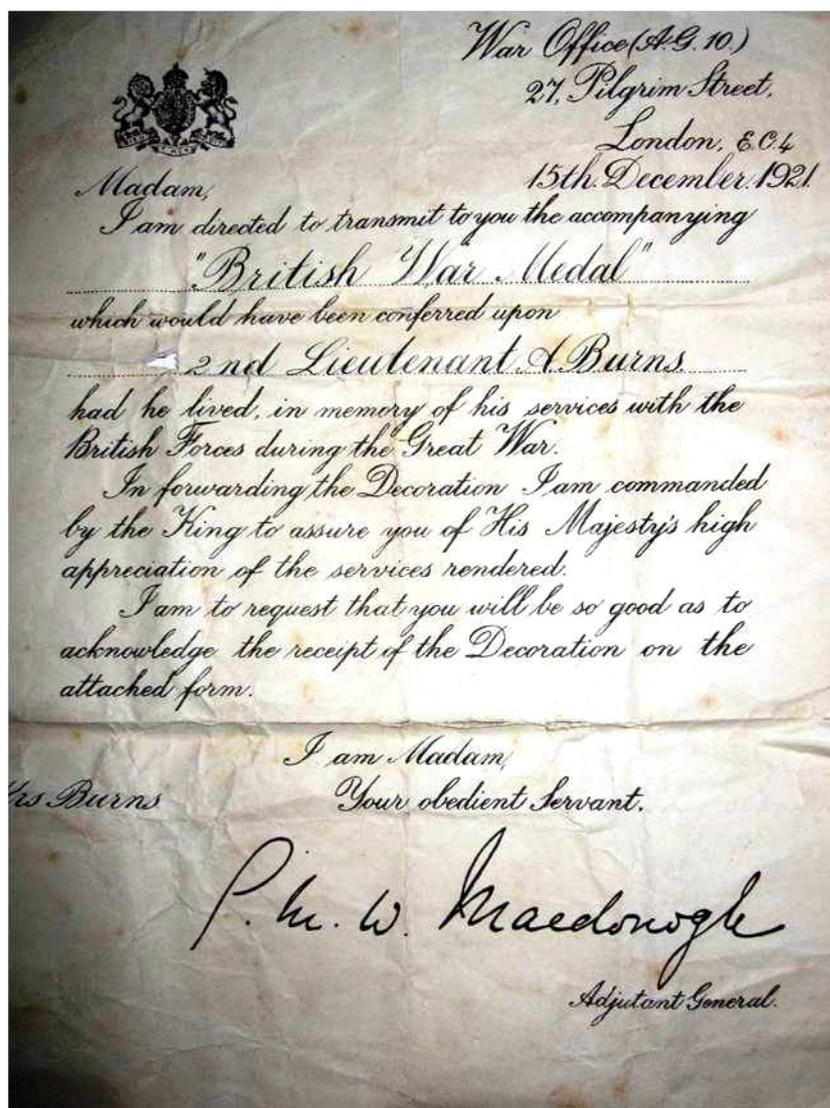
Once in England, Alec was able to meet with his brother, Jamie, several times. On one occasion, they arranged to have their photograph taken together in uniform, Alexander on the left, James on the right. It is on the front cover of this booklet. He was trained as a Pilot in England, passing in two months all flying tests and on completion of flying training, Alexander was a member of 47 Squadron, 12th Brigade, Royal Australian Flying Corps. He was then transferred to an advanced division where he was engaged in testing new aeroplanes.

In April 1917, he was flying with 59 Squadron at Fort Grange Airfield, Gosport. Alexander died from injuries after his De Havilland IA No 1625 aeroplane crashed on 20 April 1917.

After a malfunction, the aircraft plummeted from a height of 4000 feet. He was badly injured and both his legs were broken. Alexander lived three hours after the accident, the last hour being unconscious. He was aged 24 years. A few days prior to his death, Alec had been to London where he had spent time with his brother, Jamie. On his departure, Alec was in fine form and was farewelled by Jamie at Waterloo Station. In a letter to his parents, Jamie wrote, 'Then he looked well, and was so confident that I believed that nothing would happen to him, and that when the war is over, the two of us together would return to the old home.'

His coffin bearing a large wreath from the RFC was taken by gun carriage to Ann's Hill Cemetery, Gosport where he was interred with full RFC honours. His brother James was in attendance and had organised wreaths of flowers for his parents and each of his sisters and himself which were laid on his grave. On the morning of the crash, Alec had written a letter to his youngest sister, Queenie. After his death, Jamie forwarded it to the family. Jamie wrote, 'I cannot write how it grieved me that one like Alec so young, and with such a career before him could be cut off in this life so shortly.'

Lieutenant Alexander Burns was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. For his achievements and sacrifice he is honoured at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church and his name is also on the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument to the Fallen at Indooroopilly War Memorial in Keating Park, Indooroopilly.



Select Bibliography and Acknowledgement

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Information and photographs were provided by Janice Fay Anderson (née Boyling), M Ed St., BA, B Ed St, Dip Ed , AMusA., PPL. (Pilot Licence).

Janice is the great-niece of James and Alexander Burns, her father being Keith Alexander Boyling, son of Charles and Margaret Boyling (nee Burns). Margaret was the first child of James and Helen Burns and eldest sister of Jamie and Alexander. Janice remembers well her Uncle Jamie with whom she shared her birth date. He inspired her to university studies and the memory of Alexander, the first pilot in the family, inspired her to gain her Pilot's Licence.



Lest we forget